

**Friday, September 9, 2005**  
*Becoming a Prolific Scholar*

For my BGSU email signature, I use the following quote from Tao Te Ching (attributed to Lao Tzu): *You accomplish the great task by a series of small acts.* As I started to do research for this teaching tip on becoming a prolific scholar, I realized how appropriate this quote is for capturing the process of scholarly writing. As a person who schedules lots of meetings with faculty, I often encounter faculty schedules that are blocked out for writing times. Faculty tell me, "I need at least one full day or more a week to just write or my publication agenda is in peril." I can relate to that. I too often search for large blocks of time when I can write. Often, however, those times never seem to materialize.

But I've learned something interesting over the years. A prolific scholar does not necessarily need large blocks of time to write in order to be productive. In [Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar](#) (<<http://www.teaching.nmsu.edu/acadbookstore.html>>, or as a reference book at our Center), Tara Gray writes that faculty can do as well or even better with their scholarly writing if they do it in short chunks of time. I think she makes a good point, especially for those who never can seem to get those large chunks of time because of other important commitments such as family, administrative tasks, teaching and service work.

Rick Reis (Stanford University), recently published a summary of the research on this topic to a popular listserve that I am a member of. In "Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar." Reis writes that "The myth persists that prolific scholars are born, not made, but research suggests otherwise. Much is known about how to become more prolific-and any scholar can." Research supports (Becker, Howard S., 1986; Boice, R., 1989) Reis and Gray's claim that scholarship can only be achieved by persistence and organized strategies that don't necessarily imply that you put aside large chunks of time for your writing. In fact, research suggests that more scholarly writing can be done if you just set aside a short amount of time each day to write.

I can imagine my former writing teacher in secondary school saying, "I told you so." In fact, most writers know that writing everyday is essential in becoming a good writer. So, how do we do this? Gray writes in her book that to be productive scholars should :

"Write daily for 15 to 30 minutes. Many scholars believe that writing requires big blocks of time. They're wrong. Research shows that scholars who write daily publish far more than those who write in big blocks of time. The problem with big blocks of time is that they're hard to find. In contrast, when you write daily, you start writing immediately because you remember what you were writing about the day before. This leads to impressive production. In one study participants who wrote daily wrote only twice as many hours as those who wrote occasionally in big blocks of time but wrote or revised ten times as many pages (Boice 2000:144)."

Gray further writes that one should "record time spent writing daily, share records weekly. Writing daily increases your productivity as a writer. But to write daily you will need to keep a daily record of your writing, and share those records with someone weekly. What difference does keeping records make? Robert Boice led a series of workshops for scholars who sought to improve their writing productivity. Boice stressed the importance of writing daily, keeping a record of the minutes spent on writing, and being accountable to someone weekly. Participants were divided into three groups: (a) The first group ("controls") did not change their writing habits, and continued to write occasionally in big blocks of time; in 1 year they wrote an average of 17 pages; (b) the second group wrote daily and kept a daily record; they averaged 64 pages; (c) the third group wrote daily, kept a daily record, and held themselves accountable to someone weekly; this group's average was 157 pages (Boice 1989:609). Without records and someone to share them with it is too easy to convince yourself that you will write "tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never comes-or at least it doesn't come very often."

So, if you are having trouble finding those large chunks of time for your writing, don't despair. Carve out time daily-if even for an hour or less-and see how your productivity increases. For some of us, it is the only choice we might have, but it is encouraging to find research that reveals consistent daily writing and shared writing are critical components to becoming a prolific scholar.

#### References

Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Writing for social scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boice, Robert. (1989). Procrastination, busyness and bingeing. *Behavior Research Therapy*, 27, 605-611.

Please read Tara Gray's book for more interesting ideas about how to become a more prolific scholar.

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